

# Facing Black and Jew

Literature as Public Space in  
Twentieth-Century America

Adam Zachary Newton



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## Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
Introduction	1
1. The space between black and Jew	1
2. History and allegory: a match made in shadow	15
1 “An antiphonal game” and beyond: facing Ralph Ellison and Henry Roth	24
2 “Jew me sue me don’t you black or white me”: The (ethical) politics of recognition in Chester Himes and Saul Bellow	56
3 “Words generally spoil things” and “Giving a man final say”: facing history in David Bradley and Philip Roth	81
4 Literaturized Blacks and Jews; or Golems and Tar babies: reality and its shadows in John Edgar Wideman and Bernard Malamud	111
5 Black–Jewish inflations: face(off) in David Mamet’s <i>Homicide</i> and the O. J. Simpson trial	142
Postface Déjà-vu all over again; or, mirrors and the face – Anna Deavere Smith after Levinas	158
<i>Notes</i>	169
<i>Bibliography</i>	204
<i>Index</i>	214

## “An antiphonal game” and beyond: facing Ralph Ellison and Henry Roth

*That's the way I've torn on through,  
Torn my way, and bitten, too,  
With my head as through a wall  
Cross-country, over roads and all.  
Break the stone  
With tooth and bone!  
Dog & bum, clod & wind so wild:  
Reckless and free, on alien dirt,  
I have no coat, I have no shirt  
I have no wife and I have no child  
So as if to break  
The drum, I bang  
And then I make the cymbals clang  
And round and round about I spin –  
Boom! Din-din-din!  
Boom!*

אט אזוי זין דורכגעצויסן,  
דורכגעצויסן, דורכגעצויסן  
סיטן קאפ ווי דורך אוואבט,  
איבער שטעג און וו עג און לאבד  
סיטדי ציין –  
האק רצם שייין!  
האק רצם שטיין און גייב אליין!  
הובט און פלעפעד, לוספ און ווינט.  
הפקר דודן דער פרעמד!  
האב איט קיין דאק, קיין העמד  
האב אין ביט קיין יוייב, קיין קיבד.  
פויק אין אז די פויק זאל פלאצד,  
און אין דזשיברזשע אין די טאצן  
און אין דדיי זין הובד-ארום –  
דזשין, דזשין, בום-בו-ם-בוים  
דזשין דזשין בום!  
דזשין דזשין בום!

MOYSHE-LEYB HALPERN

*I lie down in the shadow.  
No longer the light of my dream before me,  
Above me.  
Only the thick wall.  
Only the shadow.*

*My hands!  
My dark hands!  
Break through the wall!  
Find my dream!  
Help me to shatter this darkness,  
To smash this night,  
To break this shadow  
Into a thousand lights of sun  
Into a thousand whirling dreams of sun!*

LANGSTON HUGHES

I myself was a public square, a *sook*; through me passed words,  
tiny syntagms, bits of sentence . . . Roland Barthes

In this chapter I will trace out some implications of facing as an encounter in sensibility – an antiphony or call and response in sound and sight. What develops over its chapter does not, however, pretend to efface the differences that make Roth's novel *Roth's* novel and Ellison's, *Ellison's*. But I want to stress at the outset that the aggregated differences distinguishing these texts from one another – ethnic, racial, literary-historical, and intentional differences – do not therefore inhibit a dialogic facing between them. On the contrary, the resulting antiphony, I hope, makes them sound (and look) fresh in a way only vis-à-vis one another.

I would prefer, then, to let the texts themselves speak before I intervene, but of course it would be disingenuous to pretend that their dialogue precedes my intervention. As with Du Boisian sparkles and kabbalist sparks, *Invisible Man* and *Call It Sleep* wake and become visible to one another because of an encounter contrived between them, beyond the confines of what Ellison's novel calls a mere "antiphonal game." As a general guide, however, the following analysis looks primarily at these texts' linguistic plenitude – a novelistic property, certainly, but perhaps more importantly, the allegory that is narrated by "African American" and "Jewish American" writ large in African American and Jewish American Imaginaries.

### An allegory of antiphony

"I am an invisible man."  
"He shut his eyes."

Hear them in call-and-response, the first sentence of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and the last sentence of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*. Each keys into the title and a governing trope of its particular text; each locates its subject precisely. Ellison's protagonist speaks to us from within a state he calls "hibernation."<sup>1</sup> Roth's David Schearl takes leave of his readers by entering into a similar state, what the penultimate sentence of the novel says we "might as well call . . . sleep."

"*I am an invisible man.*" – an announcement, perhaps a self-description, or maybe just an invitation – the speaker's "Call me Ishmael." As plain assertion, *Invisible Man's* words bear witness not to ontologic defect but phenomenological crime: others simply refuse to see him, "a matter of the construction of their *inner eyes*," he explains, "those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality." (3) Through his place of hibernation, by contrast, *Invisible Man* acquires a kind of second sight. In his "hole in the ground," refulgent with the light of 1,369 light-bulbs, he turns his invisibility to

advantage; light confirms his reality, it gives birth to his form, he is able to feel his vital aliveness. (6)

This heightened vision – these new-found sightlines which, as the Langston Hughes epigraph puts it, “break this shadow into a thousand lights of sun” – is but the first of a series of metamorphoses the narrator undergoes underground. His story begins anecdotally with a scene of accidental violence. While ambiguous as to whether an anonymous white man had bumped into Invisible Man, or the other way around, (cf. 4 and 14) the text uses their “encounter” as a pretext for a disquisition on dreaming, sleepwalking, recognition, responsibility, and most polymorphously, “the Blackness of Blackness,” (9) “the blackness of my invisibility,” (13) and “the music of my invisibility” – all made correspondent.

“He shut his eyes.” – a valediction: forbidding morning. An observation. Or perhaps another sort of invitation, this time, a “Call it Ishmael.” Here too, we become privy to a set of marvelous transformations the protagonist undergoes by retreating from the world, each a loss which is also a gain. And, once again, the first of these transformations involves a “peculiar disposition” of the *inner eyes*. But unlike the ones Invisible Man describes, these belong to the protagonist himself; they bring reality into sharper focus, and – far from deadening or neutralizing or effacing it – enhance and make it vitally alive:

It was only toward sleep that every wink of the eyelids could strike a spark into the cloudy tinder of the dark, kindle out of shadowy corners of the bedroom such myriad and such vivid jets of images – of the glint on tilted beards, of the uneven shine on roller skates, of the dry light on grey stone stoops . . . <sup>2</sup>

The passage goes on to describe a change in hearing, as well (as, indeed, does *Invisible Man*). In sleep, David’s ears have the power to “cull again . . . all sounds that lay fermenting in the vats of silence and the past.” Likewise (with the help of a reefer), Invisible Man tells us that in the music of Louis Armstrong he becomes aware of time’s *nodes*, “those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead,” through which he can “slip into the breaks and look around.” (8)

In a counterpart to Invisible Man’s street-fight, David has himself just survived a scene of accidental violence, precipitating rather than precipitated by, a riot of jostling. But here it is a riot of the foreign tongue, a multi-ethnic chorus of one’s own accented word relative to all the others’. The narrator’s summary statement on behalf of David’s consciousness also predicates dreaming and sleep, and may be read in its own right as a disquisition on recognition and responsibility. And

while Invisible Man riffs on Blackness, David, for the last time in the text, enters a similarly polymorphous domain of "darkness."

Each character, at the beginning of one text and the end of the other *feels* his world more intensely, and therein finds a kind of consummation. "Strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence" is what Roth assigns to David Schearl's sensate (though unconscious) grasp. A world "concrete, ornery, vile, and sublimely wonderful as before," but better understood, and more importantly, *articulable* – spoken into shape for us while *our* eyes "look through" – becomes Ellison's bequest to Invisible Man.

"I am an invisible man."  
"He shut his eyes."

With their tonalities counterpointed, "Invisibility" and "shut eyes" become doublevoiced and composite. Without violating either text overmuch, we could even transpose the two motifs' sight- and sound-lines, altering the discursive strategies to make David a first-person in the present tense, and Invisible Man a narrated third-person. Invisible Man now shuts *his* eyes, and it is David Schearl who assumes the status of an Invisible. As primary figures in the fictive worlds of each novel and despite all their differences as characters and culture heroes, this Black and this Jew can be made to *face one another* even if they do not "see" or "hear" each other.

I have not arbitrarily selected a sentence from each novel in order to pair them this way, of course. Yet *Call It Sleep* and *Invisible Man* do engage one another along lines of correspondence, threading back and forth a common concern with recognition which the short dialogue I have constructed fortuitously illustrates. No, Ellison's sophisticated troping on *invisibility* – a figure by turns for racism, and for race consciousness – has no counterpart in Roth's novel's far less politicized rendering of individual consciousness. And to be sure, a narrator who wants, Armstrong-like, "to make music of invisibility," (14) while at the same time, marshaling considerable rhetorical powers "on the lower frequencies" to "speak for" us, (568) cannot be equilibrated with a narrator chiefly concerned with turning a small boy into a lightning-rod for epiphanic sensation and visionary synthesis.

On the plane of critical currency, obviously, "ethnicity" and "race" do not easily commensurate. But that is only to emphasize again the obvious fact that it is as *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* and *Henry Roth's Call It Sleep* that these two novels stake their respective claims. I do not wish to ignore such difference, nor do I wish it fixed in amber. Besides, "race" and "ethnicity" are non-native terms for both these

novels, however much they figure in their stories narratively, conceptually. They are *critical terms*, and when one looks especially at authorial comments by Ellison (in *Shadow and Act* or the most recent preface to *Invisible Man*) and Roth (in various recent interviews), each expresses a legacy of critical inflation apart from any burden as self-understood. Each goes on speaking in the liberally inflected, artistically mobile patois of “human values” athwart more critically efficacious categories.

In the world of the novel, Ellison’s racial identity or the topic of race, Roth’s ethnic identity and the topic of ethnicity are placed in the service of other ends, a mutual communion discovered in the facing of their novels. While vicissitudes of race and ethnicity propel them, the novels resist being reduced by or to them. To put this in terms familiar to Ellison, the respective timbres of clarinet and saxophone, indeed the very material of the instruments – wood and brass – yield a “third possibility” of sound when heard in duet. And for the clarinet of ethnicity and the saxophone of race alike (as Langston Hughes said of the latter poetically), the “vulgar tone” of mere metal or wood – critical constructs – sounds more musically within, and between, the texts themselves.

### **A lesson from literary history**

Certainly one can select almost any pair of novels, place them in parallel, and draw up a list of columnar affinities. But novels like Roth’s and Ellison’s can be understood as *themselves* inviting such a linkage – an elective affinity as opposed to a merely selective one. Let us consider that complementarity for a moment in the light of each text’s separate standing and respective difference, a matter of how books tell stories of literary history.

If we grossly simplify the case for similarity between Roth’s and Ellison’s novels, each announces a highly self-conscious departure from its own local “tradition.” In program as well as style, in topic as well as structure, *Call It Sleep* (1934) and *Invisible Man* (1947) ask to be read not just as exemplary American fiction (with or without the outrider, “ethnic”), but as “literature” – whatever such category status connotes: (international?) (world?) (classic?) – in a broad sense. Both, in other words, are permeated by that “Galilean” spirit Mikhail Bakhtin ascribes to modern narrative in general, “a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness” informing all aspects of a given text.<sup>3</sup> Such “literary consciousness” originates from inside the Novel, apart from any claim for literariness staked on a particular



text's behalf. This centrifugal impulse, according to Bakhtin, but with particular reference to Roth and Ellison:

... erodes that system of national myth that is organically fused with language, in effect destroying once and for all a mythic and magical attitude to language and the word. [Such a] deeply involved participation in alien cultures and languages (one is impossible without the other) inevitably leads to an awareness of the disassociation between language and intentions, language and thought, language and expression.<sup>4</sup>

That disassociation, as I have argued for dialectical allegory, creates the conditions for a corresponding *pull* by alien cultures and languages for each other. Novels like Roth's and Ellison's may ransack a national past, but they do so in each other's presence as well as against a background of composite nationalisms, of ethnicity and race entangled. Their dialogue with each other is also a chorus with other literatures, a polyphonic antiphony.

While the kind of generalized porosity and openendedness Bakhtin describes is not identical to the more specific "decentering" impelling texts like these to reach beyond their own ethnic literary traditions (indeed, one might argue, beyond race and ethnicity *per se*), the two processes still do not operate entirely independently of each other.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, such lability underpins Bakhtinian dialogism *tout court*, a more sensitive barometer of language's auto-critique and comic sense.

For "minority literature," the complex relationship between group identity and language is, of course, anything but *minor*. Ellison's and Roth's novels *immerse* plot and character in a literary-chemical bath of collectivity and individuality where it remains ambiguous just which element is reagent and which precipitant. *Call It Sleep* and *Invisible Man* at the same time purposely *alienate* themselves from constrictive and ideologically onerous nativisms, an impulse not easy to square with the *critical* impulse that champions these same texts as representative or culturally emblematic – the ethnic-clarinete or racial-saxophone solo.

As authorially *willed* discourse, the novels internally campaign for resistance to theory.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, rather than try to mitigate such putative dissonance, perhaps we should see such programmatic homelessness as an external coefficient to the internal dramas of dislocation each text enacts. Or to state the same case differently, both novels' interest in mobile identity can be viewed in the light of a certain impatience with static notions not only of ethnicity, but of literary history and literary tradition as well.

It goes without saying that such a claim does not gainsay the plain fact that Roth and Ellison write as a Jewish American and a Black American, respectively. Moreover, each writes from within a particular cultural milieu. How else, after all, could they write? In tersely un saying itself, for example, William Faulkner's "plaudit" for *Invisible Man* – "[Ellison] has managed to stay away from being first a Negro, he is still first a writer"<sup>7</sup> – could not better expose the fatuity of any universalist argument for independent literary "value" here.<sup>8</sup>

Any claims I advance here rest therefore on two, interrelated assumptions: (1) on the broadest level, the modern novel rehearses (and often anticipates) a decentering movement that governs the very "socio-ideological evolution of languages and society"<sup>9</sup> within which literary texts take shape. In this respect, Roth's and Ellison's novels make their bids for *representative* status. (2) These same texts "territorialize" themselves within the widest inter (or better, multi-) cultural ambit. They self-consciously keep company with Kafka and Melville as well as Jean Toomer and Charles Reznikoff, which is to imagine a whole constellation of ancestors and relatives.

But focusing on how these texts position themselves in literary history, in relation to anterior texts both foreign and domestic, would seem merely to highlight a crucial *difference* between them – only the first of many. The question of both novels' "singularity" needs to be referred to the fact of each novel's singleness in relation to the other, the standing fact of their disparity. When one text in question is a first person novel and the other third-person, when that first person is an adult, and that third person a child, and when that child's drama is confined primarily to the interior spaces of mind and inchoate signification, and that adult's exploits the dimensions of physical space and signifyin(g) out loud, obviously, strictly *narrative* form and structure will not permit a facile correlation. Yet I would argue, bracketing such divergence does not necessarily distort the case for comparison, but may free us instead to explore certain thematic parallels otherwise obscured.

To take simply the matter of divergent literary inheritance. African American and Jewish American literary histories do not neatly align in anything close to exact congruence, Ellison's "anxiety of influence" being a far more densely populated entity than Roth's. Twentieth-century African American fiction (in the form of the first-person novel) has a precursor history in nineteenth-century slave narrative, both traditions comprising that "vast, multivolume project of Narrating the Negro"<sup>10</sup> for which no analogue really exists in Jewish American fiction.

In an extremely sensible essay, Robert Alter expresses a wise diffidence about translating “vague intuitions” of (in this case) characteristically Jewish attributes “into clear descriptive statements about what actually goes on in the literary works.”<sup>11</sup> Using Leslie Fiedler’s archetypal model as foil (the Jew as *Master of Dreams*), Alter observes,

[U]sing the same mythic touchstone to identify characteristically Jewish literary inventions, one might justifiably conclude that the most remarkable American Jewish novel is neither *Call It Sleep* nor *Herzog* but Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

He even quotes an Ellisonian axiom: “Archetypes are timeless; novels are time haunted.” And so, of course, are the histories we construct around them.

The retro-construction of post-war Jewish American writers like Malamud, Bellow, and Roth into a “school” (something each held at bay) does not describe the Jewish twin to a *sui generis* movement like the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> The parity here would have to be invented. Very different kinds of cultural politics dictate the formation of a canon in each case. By the 1950s in American literary history, the task of gathering under the same sign of the hyphen widely disparate ethnic sensibilities and modes of cultural self-understanding as we find in Jewish American literature alone, becomes simply elusive. (A similar argument could be mounted for Black fiction as well, something both Ellison and James Baldwin spelled out, in different ways, at the time.<sup>13</sup>)

Roth’s text, in fact, only prefigures these developments. Hardly in the same class as Mike Gold’s *Jews Without Money*, and despite its Joycean ethos, the book was typically read – when it *was* read – through the lens of proletarian fiction (with which it has little but locale in common) and ghetto narrative. Neglected as it was for years or more recently claimed as definitive, Roth’s novel still remains anomalous, a notoriously tough act to follow (even by its own author).<sup>14</sup>

The fiction of Yeziarska, Lewisohn, and Mary Antin (certainly of Cahan and Sidney Nyburg) bears only the dimmest relation to it. *By the Waters of Manhattan* (Reznikoff), *Aaron Traum* (the brothers Cohen), *Bottom Dogs* and *From Flushing to Calvary* (Edward Dahlberg) may constitute its modernist peers, but Roth’s novel does not really rub shoulders with any of them. Nor from a subsequent vantage does *Call It Sleep* haunt Daniel Fuchs’s *Williamsburg Trilogy* or Rosenfeld’s *Passage From Home*, each of which stands in only the most tenuous of “agonistic” relations to it. Paradoxically or not, for such an Oedipally

driven text, *Call It Sleep* does not seem particularly fixated on predecessors or forbears: if Roth has a strong-poet precursor or a literary descent-rival for cultural consent, it is Joyce or Eliot if it is anyone.<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, if we cluster together the likes of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Jesse Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Rudolph Fisher (not to mention Wright or Himes, given the ten-year discrepancy between Roth's novel and Ellison's), we get some idea of the densely endogamous kinship network that surrounds *Invisible Man*. Ellison's novel consciously *thematizes* its lineal relation to Black culture: to slave narrative, to folk vernacular, to *The Souls of Black Folk*, to William Dunbar's *Sport of the Gods*, to Johnson's *Ex-Coloured Man*, to Richard Wright. *Call It Sleep* is an orphan by comparison, and calling it an "ethnic novel" certainly poses more questions than answers. Yet, Ellison's text too (together with its author) resists the narrow and received confines of "race" as its ancestral and native home.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, this direction will not really take us very far if we remain bent on charting discrepancies between the two texts since it caps the energies of intertextual reach and full extent of literary influence each novel wants to claim for itself. As regards *Call It Sleep* and *Invisible Man*, any antiphony between them takes place *inside* a polyphony, a public space of heterogeneous literary relations. The opening sentence from Ellison's novel together with the framing conceit it initiates, sets the novel in deliberate relation to Dostoyevsky and Melville. The penultimate chapter of Roth's, with its contrapuntal, multilingual structure (and the novel's play with consciousness and narrative voice in general) makes a similarly conspicuous bid for high culture status "beyond ethnicity." *Call It Sleep* attempts a Judeo-Christian synthesis; *Invisible Man* forces African American "Invisibility" and "blackness" into the horizontal space occupied by American "Optic White."

Both writers' anti-realist sensibilities – Ellison's preference for allegory, Roth's play with symbol – gesture forward to a *transnational* modernism, a full blown heteroglossia of the Novel, just as they simultaneously reach back to usable forms of nineteenth-century American literature. "I am in the great tradition of American t[h]inkers," says *Invisible Man*.<sup>17</sup> But to view literary texts in this way calls for a critic's version of the kind of unbound sensibility and tinker's sense that Roth's and Ellison's novels license in themselves. Literature often corrects for criticism's blindnesses, just as criticism endeavors to supplement the literary with its own insights. Thus, in *Invisible Man*'s and David Schearl's stories, Bakhtin's concept of

literary “homelessness” paradoxically discovers its obverse: each novel latently keeps the company of the other, as well as that of other traditions, times, and places. Exile becomes an ingathering, as the ethnic modernist shares public discursive space with, if not fellow cosmopolites, then literary kinsmen. As Ellison puts it himself in *Shadow and Act*, “Unlike a relative, the artist is permitted to choose an ancestor.” (162)

### Lessons in object-relations: the wearing and absorbing of words

Invisible Man and David Shearl are human synecdoches – not only in the predictable ethno-racial sense as novelistic heroes, but also as stand-ins for a general verbal overload, for a fulness of discursive space. In excess of the many scenes of eye-contact rife in both novels,<sup>18</sup> recognition takes place as, or against, an expressive *landscape*. The novels are determined to get themselves heard, against and within other sheets of sound. That metaphor (from Gunther Schiller’s description of John Coltrane) points to the way *Invisible Man* and *Call It Sleep* possess their own musicality, their own *time signature*, the fore-pulse of personal, present experience over the insistent beat of familial and cultural freight. In Bakhtinian jargon, to be a human synecdoche is also to be a human chronotope – “where the knots of narrative are tied and untied,” in time.<sup>19</sup>

Recognition thus underwrites the material content of each book not as a drive towards knowledge (the basic premise of literary realism) but as a filter through which to perceive and sort culture; recognition, in this sense, does not so much pierce the mystery of experience as preserve it intact.<sup>20</sup> Finally, and as the heading to this chapter makes clear, in the tangled dealings each protagonist has with other characters, recognition in these novels “verbs” in the imperative: *call me/call it*. That is a demand for visibility and audibility made of insiders and outsiders alike, as my epigraph from Halpern’s “The Street Drummer” suggests: the clamor of an isolated and dispossessed self venting a personal *I am! See me! Hear me!* by harnessing at street level the cultural debris – and particularly the *noise* – that collects around him. “Look at me! Look at *me*,” (494) Invisible Man demands of the Brotherhood. “Whistle, mister! WHISTLE” (431) David unconsciously vents at the culmination of his final and dazzling act of synthesis.

But the texts make their own like demands on our attention, even above the heads of their heroes; in their materiality, the discursive

landscapes of *Call It Sleep* and *Invisible Man* function only partially as “backdrops.” For they are also themselves kinetic, strewn with junk, brimming with thing, sight, and sound. The very book divisions of Roth’s text – “The Cellar,” “The Picture,” “The Coal,” and “The Rail” – for example, narrate a spare progression of brute object facts. So does the entire plot of Ellison’s novel – Brother Tarp’s chain-link, the broken pieces of a toy bank, a sambo doll, various documents. As these texts fairly soak in their own linguistic plenitude, such object-facts are at the same time, perhaps even primarily, facts of *language*, separately and altogether a kind of summons to readers’ eyes and ears.

Additionally, each novel invokes language and other symbol-systems by turns coded, opaque, and *politically* charged, selecting out insiders and outsiders.

Then later [my grandfather] told me to open my briefcase and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another, and another endlessly, and I thought I would fall at weariness . . . “Now open that one.” And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. “Read it,” my grandfather said. “Out loud!” “To Who It May Concern,” I intoned. “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.” . . . at that time I had no insight into its meaning. First I had to attend college. (Ellison, 33)

“How d’you play bad?” she asked.

“Bad? I don’t know,” he quavered.

“Yuh wan’ me to show how I?”

He was silent, terrified.

“Yuh must ask me,” she said. “G’wan ask me.”

“Wot?”

“Yuh must say, Yuh wanna play bad? Say it!”

He trembled. “Yuh wanna play bad?”

“Now, *you* said it,” she whispered. “Don’ forget, you said it.”

By the emphasis of her words, David knew he had crossed some awful threshold. (Roth, 53)

And later David will say of language that does not stay put, “Everything changed . . . They [words] were something else, something horrible. Trust nothing.” (102) In both novels, linguistic plenitude is also a torrent through which one either swims or sinks, holding on to the odd bit of solid object or solid that comes to hand. Each novel embeds a “secret” narrative – the inset story of Trueblood in *Invisible Man*, and of David’s mother’s romantic past in *Call It Sleep* – that trade between them themes of transgressive sexuality, family violence, and

cultural overconnectedness. Just so, as a symbol system, or as the consciously ordered linguistic artifact known as "a novel" for that matter, discourse possesses the capacity to make and unmake, expose and conceal, usually doing one in the service of the other.

Both novels exemplify the modern novel at its most metonymic: a clothes-line, a rosary, a chain, telephone poles in succession, a carom of objects and emblems and words. In chapter 14 of *Call It Sleep*, for example, David's mother's nervousness, translated into haphazard object-relations, translates itself all over again into David's metonymic behavior, the whole sequence a model for the novel's obsession with associativeness, contiguity, and unmoored signifiers:

She went from the sink to the window and left the water running and then remembering it was an odd overhastiness, turned, missed the handkerchief she was pegging to the clothes-line and let it fall into the yard. A few minutes later, separating the yolks from the whites of the eggs . . . she cut the film of the yolk with eggshell, lost it in the whites. She stamped her foot, chirped with annoyance, and brushed back her hair . . . [David] occupied himself in a score of ways – now frightening himself by making faces at the pier glass, now staring out of the window, now fingering the haze of breath upon it, now crawling under beds, now scribbling. He spent an hour tying himself to the bed post with a bit of washline and attempting to escape, and another constructing strange devices with trinkets. (117)

Or again, true to its immodest allegoricalness, *Invisible Man* holds out a chain-link as (along with its narrator-protagonist) one of its most prominent *running* motifs.

I looked at the dark band of metal against my fist, and dropped it upon the anonymous letter . . . I felt that Brother Tarp's gesture in offering it was of some deeply felt significance which I was compelled to respect. Something perhaps like a man passing on to his son his own father's watch, which the son accepted not because he wanted the old-fashioned time-piece for itself, but because of the overtones of unstated seriousness and solemnity of parental gesture which at once joined him with his ancestors, marked a high point of his present, and promised a concreteness to his nebulous and chaotic future. (380)<sup>21</sup>

Like Roman Jakobson's famous linguistic model of an axis of "substitution" (metaphor) projected onto an axis of "combination" (metonymy), cultural continuity comes about through a crossing of paternity and patrimony (hence, the sequence of father figures in the novel through whose hands *Invisible Man* passes, as their varying stock of symbolic capital reciprocally passes through his).

The chain link's semantic heft correlates exactly with its object-function: it burdens, it shackles, it connects, it narrates. It serves as mnemonic, as token for re-cognition:

Perhaps from the shock of seeming to see my grandfather looking through Tarp's eyes, perhaps through the calmness of his voice alone, or perhaps through his story and his link of chain, he had restored my perspective. (381)

The most important word in these two passages for me is not "father" "grandfather" or even "parental," but, rather, *concreteness*. Even if Invisible Man's future (like David Schearl's present) stays "nebulous and chaotic," culture and his participation in it weigh in with incredible density – unremittingly concrete . . . and concretized. The classic instance of this in the novel is the eviction or dispossession scene in chapter 13, an event framed explicitly in terms of *anagnorisis*. From the display aspect of the "scene" to the audience of bystanders assigned to witness it ("witnesses of what we did not want to see"), a tableau of recognition is staged, tracked by Invisible Man's methodical inventory of household objects. His soliloquy becomes redemptive, gathering-in what has been so shamelessly dishevelled in the public space of stoop and street.

Appropriately enough, the inventory begins with a pair of faces – a portrait of the evicted couple – described as "looking back at me"; it continues for a page and a half – a demotic, decidedly un-homeric, catalogue.

. . . a useless inhalant, a string of bright glass beads with a tarnished clasp, a rabbit foot, a celluloid baseball scoring card shaped like a catcher's mitt, registering a game won or lost years ago; an old breast pump with rubber bulb yellowed with age, a worn baby shoe and a dusty lock of infant hair tied with a faded and crumpled blue ribbon . . . a fragile paper, coming apart with age, written in black ink grown yellow. I read FREE PAPERS. (266)

In the set piece immediately before this scene, Invisible Man plays sidewalk Proust, awash with remembrance of things past through the taste of an al fresco "hot, baked Car'lina yam." Thus already *located* in the grip of memory – "I yam what I am" – (260) he responds to the dispossession scene by being repossessed by the slipping-inside-the-breaks sensibility tripped off in the prologue by dope and Louis Armstrong's horn.

I turned and looked at the jumble, no longer looking at what was before my eyes, but inwardly-outwardly, around a corner into the dark, far-away-and-long-ago, not so much of my own mem-



ory as of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images heard even when not listening at home. And it was as though I myself was being dispossessed of some painful yet precious thing which I could not bear to lose . . . And with this sense of dispossession came a pang of recognition: this junk, these shabby chairs, [etc.] all throbbled within me with more meaning than there should have been. (266-267)<sup>22</sup>

Invisible Man finds himself idling here in the realms of the *neighbor* and of *everyday language*, the novel's superior versions of kinship-relations. And yet he shifts right away into the high gear of elevated rhetoric in one of his many spokesman set-pieces (prompting his immediate recruitment by the propagandistic "Brotherhood"), that "eloquence"-above-the-everyday-exchange circumscribing his aloneness in language, and his solitude generally. While his linguistic sense may be Galilean and centrifugal, his characteristic predicament in social relations is to remain Ptolemeic and self-centered.<sup>23</sup>

To turn analogously to David Schearl, the crowded world of "junk" that comes to hand, and eye, and ear in *Call it Sleep*, likewise throbs with more meaning than it should perhaps otherwise contain, independent of the general agglutinative style of the novel's discourse. As befits a small child's more inchoate and broken chain of association (more interior and individualized but at the same time markedly ineloquent and unrhetorical), David's also swings bivalently between connection and dispossession. And as in Ellison's text, this is ultimately experienced as a problem of disentangling self from world, of negotiating filial responsibilities both bound and free.

But where Invisible Man assembles, David sponges, profoundly permeable to the impact . . .

. . . of the glint on tilted beards, of the uneven shine on roller skates, of the dry light on grey stone stoops, of the tapering glitter of rails, of the oily sheen on night-smooth rivers, of the glow on thin blonde hair, red faces, of the glow on the out-stretched, open palms of legions and legions of hands hurtling toward him . . . the perpetual blur of shod and running feet, the broken shoes, new shoes, stubby, pointed, caked, polished, bunions, pavement beveled, lumpish, under skirts, under trousers. (Roth, 441)

He seems able to reconstitute the press of humanity, of top-to-bottom physicality, as something more than merely *proximate* but almost *engrossed*. He absorbs others. Invisible Man tinkers with them. The two characters do not mirror each other according to how each lives in, or through, language; but they do bend each other's light.

If we think of Brother Tarp's link of chain bequeathed to Invisible

Man as the perfect image of the embodied and binding past shackling the present-tense self to family and history, its complementary counterpart in *Call It Sleep* is a pair of bull's horns. In chapter 6 of the section entitled "The Rail," David is greeted by the sight of bull's horns lying on the dinner table, a wall-mounting purchased by his father, and ostensibly a reminder of days tending cattle for his own father in Austria. David fixates on this most unusual adornment to a Jewish home at the same moment as he notes a strange look in his mother's face, the text's oblique nod to the afterglow of his parents' lovemaking.

In the previous relevant scene, David's mother greets him still wet from her bath, forcing the painful realization that she and a naked woman espied at her bath from the rooftop by a gang of neighborhood boys are one and the same. Immodest in *its* Freudianism too,<sup>24</sup> Roth's novel positions the horns next to another pair of phalluses, "a new white handled whip and the butt of the old broken black one" (297) (the latter the result of one of father's splenetic rages vented on an anonymous man in the street). Libidinally charged by a series of sexualized scenarios, David is not inclined to accept at face value his mother's explanation of the horns as being merely a "memento."

Somehow looking at the horns, guessing the enormous strength of the beast who must have owned them, there seemed to be another reason. He couldn't quite fathom it though. But why was it that two things so remote from each other seemed to have become firmly coupled in his mind? It was as though the horns lying on the washtub had bridged them, as though one tip pierced one image and one tip the other, that man outstretched on the sidewalk, that mysterious look of repose in his mother's face when he had come in (299).

A physical sign themselves of disjunction within connectivity, the horns are made to "bridge" male sexuality and aggression (perhaps with an ironic nod to cuckoldry). They also conjoin paternity, the upswell of cultural memory, and the associative process of "bridging" itself.<sup>25</sup> But as with *Invisible Man*, it is, I would argue, the concrete object itself which is a sum greater and more palpable than its combined parts. *Invisible Man* will muse upon his mother's imagined hands and gray head, "why were they causing me discomfort so far beyond their intrinsic meaning as objects?" (267) which seems to hint at his greater allegiance to symbol-systems instead of the disparate signifiers David prefers.

The horns in *Call It Sleep* may not cognitively solve the problems posed by its several associative parts, but it certainly *resolves* them in a chemical sense, binding together a whole nexus of meanings. Thus,

while the novel as a whole beckons psychological readings (David's negotiation of Imaginary and Symbolic realms, of mother and father, of mirror and language, of oral and phallic signifiers), it stubbornly insists on the brute facts of its bits of the Real as its densest semiotic currency, as its most material basis for, and version of, language. In this way it fore-echoes *Invisible Man* as *Invisible Man* echoes it in turn.

Each of the objects introducing the major book divisions in Roth's novel performs the same function: "the picture" (a corn field that bridges family history, illicit tryst, and courtship); "the cellar" (bridging fear, clandestinity, and sex); "the coal" (bridging speech, taint, and purification); and "the rail" (bridging energy, light, and "marvelous transformation").<sup>26</sup> Towards the end of the novel, David gives vent to his own manic expression of this, the text's penchant for "bridging" and coupling. Having blurted out a confused story about his own origins (patched together from conversations overheard but half understood and from his own imagination) he bolts into the street. As at other moments in the novel when internal confusion breeds flight, the text metonymically tracking him against a succession of telephone poles or sidewalk cracks, David now propels himself forward, punctuating his racing thoughts by wishing for a "potsee" so that he could "kick it here . . . and kick it there . . . and follow where it went" (378) – the very image of serial, though random, progression. He pauses before a store window.

Only his own face met him, a pale oval, and dark, fear-struck, staring eyes that slid low along the windows of stores, snapped off from glass to glass, mingled with the enemas, ointment jars, green globes of the drug store, snapped off, mingled with the baby clothes, snapped off with the cans of paint, steel tools, frying pans, clotheslines of the hardware store, snapped off. (378–379)

The fragmented montage created by his own reflected movement in the window-glass provides David with an intermittent haven. In between the succession of objects "snapped off," David discovers a kind of non-space of, let us say, invisibility.

On the windows how I go. Can see and ain't. And when I ain't, where? Ain't nobody. No place. Stand here, then. BE Nobody. Always. Nobody'd see. Nobody'd know . . . Carry, yes, carry a looking glass. Teenchy weenchy one, like in a pocket book, Mama's. Yea. Yea. Yea. Stand by house. Be nobody. Can't see. (379)

"Can see and ain't" is one way of putting the novel's central theme, an ethnic identity problem as well as a personal one, the disappearing

act of a self facing sensory and *cultural* overload. Superficially at least, that problem resembles a parallel theme in *Invisible Man*: how to disentangle a self, how to find a voice, how to *individuate*. On one side, Homer Barbee, the blind seer of *Invisible Man*'s university, a paean to knowing one's place. On the other side, the utter dissociation and displacement Rinehart, the novel's final allegorical figure, turns to advantage; Reverend and runner, "dark-glass boy," he is the master of chaos and possibility, of fluidity, of ethnic *jeu* as con.<sup>27</sup> Both figures dissemble, both see opaquely, one blind and the other wearing dark glasses – an overload of defective seeing that *Invisible Man* ultimately counters by means of 1,369 lightbulbs in his refuge underground.

*Invisible Man*'s antiphonal rejoinder to David Schearl would be therefore "Can see and am!" If, the figure of Rinehart demonstrates the most obvious instance of self-identity and verbal play as *wardrobe* – words donned, acquired, exhibited – any parallel with *Call it Sleep* halts at the brink of David's interiority, the difference between Roth's "Can't see" (i.e., "He shut his eyes"), and Ellison's triumph over "Monopolated Power and Light."<sup>28</sup>

Another difference: unlike Ellison's novel which is all headlong rush, Roth's adds a contrapuntal retrograde to its potsee leaps ahead. In the midst of the drivenness narrated above, the text has David *retard*; he keeps moving, but on "tottering, rebellious legs," this time using the series of poles to impede rather than impel.

His eyes glazing with panic, he crept toward his house, and as he went, grasped at every rail and post within reach not to steady himself, though he was faint, but to retard. And always he went forward, as though an ineluctable power tore him from the moorings he clutched. (379)

Such stop-time within motion is a rhythm announced in the very first pages of the novel, where the steamer that carries David and his mother to the Golden Land nearing its dock, "drift[s] slowly and with canceled momentum as if reluctant." (3)

Both ethnicity and personhood are matters of push-and-pull for David. He cannot fit the contours of *Invisible Man*'s picaresque because he is so obviously labile and unfinished a character; he is, after all, not yet ten years old. It is David's very unfinalizability that gives him depth and dimension, a matter of language as well as consciousness. By contrast, *Invisible Man* appears more *figure* than character, more rhetoric than exchange, his function within the novel almost entirely allegorical, reveling in "the 'enthusiasm' of eloquence."<sup>29</sup> Thus, from the dream of pursuit that begins his account to the flight

underground terminating it, Invisible Man answers to a single prime directive; "Keep This Nigger Boy Running." Moreover, Invisible Man himself, as an effectively finished protagonist, does not develop, as much as become exposed to the dialogizing influence of other characters and their "discourses," the better to perform his own.

In the novel's first chapter, just as Invisible Man has begun to narrate autobiographically, his dying grandfather bequeaths to him the linguistic legacy, "overcome [white people] with yeses . . . agree 'em to death and destruction," (16) words, our narrator confesses (for "the first time . . . outside the family circle") which "were like a curse." (17) "On my graduation day," reads the next sentence, "I delivered an oration in which I showed that humility was the secret, indeed the very essence of progress." (17)

Two secrets revealed through two palpably different language-games, each, however, idiosyncratically warping public and private, authoritative and inner-persuasive discourses. Two speech-acts whose sequencing models the rest of the text's ensuing concatenation of rhetorics. While one might want to distinguish here between, say, "home speech" (familial, vernacular, authentic) and "away speech" (alien, distanced, and distancing), it may be more plausible to read these simply as two versions of the same linguistic problem. *Language*, Ellison's novel says, is always the not-self, the exterior – coerced and imposed, taken up or discarded, the container or form for identity.

By contrast, when David blurts out to two Rabbis the garbled sense he makes of the story that passes between his mother and his aunt (part in *mameloshn*, part in alien Polish), of his mother's past liaison with a gentile, he publicizes a family secret whose import and selective vocabulary have a felt, almost organically mutating effect on him. Language happens *in* him whereas it happens *to* Invisible Man.

And what was it all about he wondered. What did those Polish words mean that made his mother straighten out so. Intuition prompted him. He divined vaguely that what he had just heard must be linked to the sparse hints of meaning he had heard before, that had stirred him at first so strangely and afterwards scared him. Now perhaps he might learn what it was about, but if he did, something might change again, be the something else that had been lurking all the time beneath the thing that was. (193)

"Like mica-glints in the sidewalk" (196) the text calls the word and phrase fragments David cobbles together: "Benkart," "organeest," "corn field," "goy." In this novel, "Words here and there, shimmer-

ing like distant sails tantalized him, but never drew near." (197) Eventually, however, he pieces things together to his own satisfaction. Although David's initial fears prove unfounded, as the text proceeds, all this coded linguistic information proves so much provender, ingested, stored, transforming, and transformed.

The converse of *Invisible Man* in this respect is its donning or wearing of words, the habiliment to *Call It Sleep's* aliment. All kinds of "junk" may come to hand for Invisible Man, but they get systemically absorbed by David Schearl.

### Sorting sounds and posting signs

Above I chose examples from both novels that make language mobile while mobilizing it. *Call it Sleep* and *Invisible Man* commonly evince a drive towards flux and motility: in the shared predominant chronotope of "the road," in the Odyssean thrust of the main character, in the metonymic quality of the prose, the migration of word and object. A more interesting implication for each text, however, would seem to be the problem of *sorting* thus foisted onto the protagonists and their spectator-readers in the bargain. Roth's and Ellison's texts very consciously stage that sorting maneuver in a public space outside of their internal plots, in front of a readership *external* to the eviction scene in Ellison's novel or the multicultural tableau at the end of Roth's.

While each text may idiosyncratically organize both the sorting and the staging, my point regarding both is that when cultural identity becomes an *affaire de bricolage*, things, words, and people are randomly distributed, freely associating according to that peculiar Quixotean novelistic habit of letting metonymy run rampant. That Ellison's and Roth's novel both do so, suggests to me that they are comparably interested in the ways that culture sorts persons and persons, culture. Moreover it illustrates how for both texts (in Ellison's words from *Shadow and Act*), "a writer did not so much create the novel as he was created by the novel."

"Boddeh," "Poddeh," "Potter," "Bodder," "Pother an' Body an' Powther," "Bahday": does it really matter, finally, which of these names most closely approximates the name of the Schearls' street in Brownsville, as Irish policemen try to decipher the name David pronounces? As long as "Cocaine" can blur briefly with "kockin" (Yiddish for defecate), or "molleh" (*molar*) superimpose itself on "molleh" (Yiddish for circumcision), (160) we understand the Sassurian trick of language being exploited here. Or the similar manipulation in *Invisible Man* that splits "responsibility" into the separate

phonemes, “respon” and “-sibility.” (30) The desire for communication compromised – “respon . . .” – by language as pure sound – “sibility” (like “sibilance”?). Or simply a reminder of invi-sibility? Responsibility does rest on recognition, as the novel claims, but in multiple senses.

A certain pressure on the social identity of the ethno-racial self could be said in these texts to undergo a strange process of lexicalization and dissemination. What is usually twoness – the hyphenate condition – becomes multipleness, as personhood proliferates into image and language. As a claim on identity linking persons, recognition here ends up being honored more in the breach than in the observance. Misfires *prove the rule*, in a double sense; they predominate, and they confirm, if negatively, the centrality of recognition as expression, to choose and be chosen by language. “It is through our names,” writes Ellison, “that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own.”<sup>30</sup> And as with names, so with faces – the uncreated features of the self’s own face, the created and decreating faces of others. Recognition undoes or is itself undone by failures of recognition, suggesting both David’s sexual mystification as well as his father’s own violence implicit in such perceptual alteration.

Faces [David] had seen so many times he scarcely ever glanced at any more were twisted into secret shadows, smeared, flattened, whorled, grotesque grief and smirking never before revealed. (Roth, 283)<sup>31</sup>

. . . seeing him above me and the others behind him as suddenly something seemed to erupt out of his face . . . . A glass eye. A buttermilk white eye distorted by the light rays . . . . I stared into his face, feeling a sense of outrage. His left eye had collapsed, a line of raw redness showing where the lid refused to close, and his gaze had lost its command. (Ellison, 463)

Invisible Man is forever asking “what?” “what did you say?” just as David continually conflates (and confuses) different languages. But abscesses in intersubjective space do not thus remain empty; they are taken up and filled in by language, itself a border zone (a term favored by Bakhtin and Invisible Man alike) between public and private worlds. Ethnicized and racialized billboards, Invisible Man and David Schearl advertise themselves in the process of being layered over by language and culture. Differently put, they “will” recognition, but only in the sense of serving as lightning rods for it.

For example, in the prologue to Roth’s text, a multi-leveled recognition scene constitutes readers’ port of entry into the novel as it